MAURICE PRENDERGAST

AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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MAURICE PRENDERGAST

BY

MARGARET BREUNING

AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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These volumes will appear in 1932.

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FOREWORD

THIS *book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.*

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Kraushaar Galleries for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts *magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.*

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art

MAURICE PRENDERGAST

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BY

MARGARET BREUNING

PEOPLE who do not fit into the scheme of things are usually irritating factors in our smug civilization. They remind us uncomfortably that the world cannot be measured with a tape line and that all its activities and aspirations cannot be neatly labelled with the scientific precision of "Exhibit A" or "B." In defense of the accepted and approved such persons must either be ignored or attacked. In the case of Maurice Prendergast, who cared nothing for esthetic vaporings and hardly realized, himself, that he and his work were firmly established "on the side of the angels," the easier way was to ignore him. And ignored he was, practically all his life, by the world of art. On his dying bed he received a check, awarded one of his canvases as a prize at the Corcoran Biennial Exhibition. With the unquenchable gaiety that no hardship or neglect could dim, he accepted this belated recognition. The *amende honorable* of this faint applause as the curtain finally descended was appraised at its exact value. "I am glad they've found out I'm not crazy, anyhow," he is reported to have said, in comment upon this scrap of paper fluttering suddenly before eyes already fixed upon a horizon so vast that it must have dwarfed all earthly experience, even the importance of awards and prizes as estimates of the value of an artist's work. Yet it is doubtful whether "they" have all found out yet how much of an artist Maurice Prendergast was. For it appears difficult for many people to consider that a work of art is serious, unless it is keyed in a serious mood. They distrust a note of gaiety and feel that it connotes a frivolous attitude towards the eternal verities of art. Yet who could be a more serious artist than Prendergast? His whole life was so devoted to his work that his real biography is more or less a listing of when, and what he painted

with the how of greater and greater realization of his growing powers.

Moreover, it is always difficult for the public to condone originality in an artist; it makes such exigent demands upon the public's intelligence and perception. Prendergast was one of the most original of artists. He stemmed from no one and like Melchizedek, had no generation, in that he was of no school and founded none. No one else could have entered his world of fantasy, or having entered it have brought back such glamorous reports. For he did create a world of his own, a world of lyrical beauty—gay movement, flickering light, scintillating color woven into exquisite harmonies—where "unheard melodies" echoed and still echo. But no one should suppose that this achievement was a casual one. The artist gave his whole being to its fulfillment so that he and his art are one. The endowment of creative imagination was a gift of the gods, but the means to express his vision in terms of line and color, of contour and plastic form, had to be striven for. He may have realized this necessity early. Perhaps, something of the importance of disciplining the hand to follow the teeming brain may have come to him in the reflection allowed by his first gainful occupation, that of washing brushes, since however conscientiously performed, it allows of much reflection.

At least we find him drawing absorbedly and perseveringly at an early period, laying the foundations of that soundness and breadth of draftsmanship which later was not only an armature of all his design, but so instinctive a part of his artistic equipment that it did not have to be considered, merely relied upon, in the final triumphant co-ordination of mind, of vision and of hand. He drew cows enthusiastically from nature, his brother Charles reports, devoting himself to their portrayal with such fervor that he appeared to have an actual passion for them. It may seem a far remove from the blithe fantasy of his later work, this vehement application to realism, but it was, actually, the means of attaining a full and significant expression of that fantasy. Like the mystic, Redon, he was able to look intently on reality and to transcend it.

But Redon used the forms with which he familiarized himself in the objective world as symbols for those strange ideas and emotions which formed the mystic world into which he escaped. Prendergast has no mysteries, no Eleusinian groves, where dim, fabulous shapes flit. He takes us into a world we know, a region flooded with vibrant sunlight, alive with melodic rhythm, glowing with color, our familiar world someway made blithe, lyrical, raised to a new point of ecstasy, yet thoroughly rooted in human sympathies and experience. To the end of creating this resplendent vision, cows were as useful as any natural forms for the young artist. He discovered, doubtless, through drawing them, which are the curving lines of contour that make for plastic form, which curving lines produce movement as he also developed power to articulate these rhythms in fluent sequence—or any of the facets of his later accomplished draftsmanship which was to give significance to each stroke of his brush in weaving pattern. In Paris he continued this arduous discipline of drawing from natural forms. This time in the life classes at Julien's under the vigilance of French masters, and, also, under the aegis of the French reverence for "probity" of line. This life class work gave him, not only the necessary fundamentals of structure, the ABC of anatomy, but, as it were, afforded access for him to the whole compendium of bodily gesture, to which he turned again and again with almost uncanny surety in striking out those little figures so casually placed on his canvases. Each one is but a few shorthand notes in the brilliant calligraphy of his fluent arabesque, yet each reveals the essential of bodily gesture, vividly conveyed in a sharp characterization, often with delightful accents of witty notation. The wind-blown figures of *Rainy Day*, the little girl who preens her skirt and flourishes her parasol in *The Mall,* or the figures with their backs turned to the beholder in the closely-textured tapestry of *The Promenade,* are not only integral parts of each design, but are remarkably differentiated in the flex and tension of posture characteristic both of physical and mental habit.

Naturalistic detail, once mastered in this long apprenticeship of drawing was, however, only employed as a necessary element of design to function in carefully considered composition, entirely subordinate to decorative unity. This fact accounts for the blotting out of faces, or the many backs turned in a whole row of figures so that there shall be no distraction of irrelevant detail from the main issue of the harmonious impression. The drawing grows constantly looser, pattern more and more freed from literalness of factual statement, until in mature achievement, his highly endowed nature finds congenial and ample expression in a formalized idiom of esthetic language rich with beauty of color and line and warm with the joyousness which it reflects from the artist's own nature. Yet having mastered this technical idiom, he was not mastered by it, but could depart from its use and employ a different language of artistic expression, if a change of mood or a particular occasion demanded it. This is evidenced by two paintings in the collection of Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, in which the portrait heads *Boy* and *Girl* are struck out vividly, with precision of contour and veracity of statement. They are enchanting versions of childhood, its freshness and charm interpreted with the sympathy of one whose heart was perpetually at the festival of youth.

Prendergast may well be said to stem from no school or artist. Yet he would have been insensitive, indeed, not to have been impressed in that first visit to Paris by the work of the luminists, then the cynosures of the artistic world. Cézanne undoubtedly influenced him—the influence is apparent even in his later work—but it was the principles of impressionism rather than its exponents which appear to have counted heavily. When he returned, his water colors, such as *The Fountain*, shown in the so-called "final exhibition" at the Kraushaar Galleries, reveal his modification of impressionism to meet his own needs. The whole canvas is alive, the fountain flashes, the leaves flicker on the trees, the figures seem to move before you. Yet in this low toned painting in which greens pre-

dominate, there is none of the fusing of color, the juxtaposition of one hot tone with a sharp one or the mannered spotting of the pointillistes, although Prendergast does employ an individual form of pointillism, the superimposing of one small bit of color on another to render vibrancy. But the coolness of palette of *The Fountain* is not typical of the artist. His visit to Venice in 1898 brought his latent gifts of color to full expression. Moreover, not only the enchanting color of that picturesque city, but its great works of art made a profound impression on the sensitive perception of the painter.

That great master of pageantry, Carpaccio, whose work is so amply shown in the Accademia in Venice, is said to have made especial impression upon Prendergast, confirming him, doubtless, in his own flair for pageantry, in his innate delight in decorative design. *Ponte della Paglia* of this period is a pageant in itself with its procession of figures jostling each other over the narrow bridge, yet all the tremendous detail—foreground figures, the complicated life of the quay, the water and sails, the distant bridges curving into the background of diversified buildings are held into coherent relation with amazing surety. *Rainy Day*, also of this period, is a remarkable weaving of curves and oblique lines into a delightful composition of extraordinary depths of recession. Yet compare either of these canvases with one of the later Venetian series, such as *Little Bridge* or *Ponte S. Vio* (both 1910), and greater freedom in handling is immediately apparent, broader draftsmanship, more fluent use of the medium, greater power of organization.

It is really futile to illustrate the work of Prendergast by black and white reproductions, for he was not only a great colorist, but color was an important element of his paintings, functioning organically with line in the development of his design. Hence without color many of his works become confused and unintelligible, for it is not their linear armature (which reproduces sharply enough), but line fused with color which gives them their distinction. This artist had a palette quite his own. Like

all great colorists, he discovered new and provocative relations of color which became his personal language, the exact instrument for conveying his sensitive reactions to the world about him. He used pure color—much green modified by adjacent tones, whites that are becoming more and more translucent every day, plangent blues, flashes of red-orange warming into vermilion, exquisite notes of azure and rose—but no enumeration furnishes any adequate idea of the range of his gamut of color notes or of his magical orchestration of them into enchanting harmonies.

Many persons who are familiar with the canvases which seem to be woven like tapestries of heavily-textured wools in blurred contours of form with almost a "repeat" of the pattern of curving line and answering curve, complain that these pastel-colored paintings are all alike. Yet if they would but look closely, they would discover it is only the theme which is similar, the beauty of the outdoor world and the joy of all creatures in it—thick clustered trees, sparkling water, fresh skies with summer clouds, a shimmer of light and color veritably transfiguring the groups that move beneath the flickering leaves or weave fluent patterns on some beach. The variation on this simple theme is in reality enormous. It sometimes seems impossible that one artist could improvise so diversely on one motif. Again, he appears to change from tapestry to stained glass through which the colors flow in translucent richness marked off by black lines of outline. Each picture is painted *con amore* as though "meadow, grove and stream" had appeared for the first time "apparelled in celestial light," and their delicate nuances and significant relations of formal beauty must be seized in a particular tonal contrast, a special accent of color, a new pattern of light.

The great number of water colors executed by Prendergast may in some measure have been necessitated by the expense involved in oil paints and canvases. In all events, he is one of the great water color painters of the country, reaching such a point of technical perfection in

his later painting, that it might almost be termed virtuosity, if his unaffected simplicity, his sincerity and unconsciousness of anything's mattering but setting down the idea which possessed him did not preclude such a term regarding his work. *The Grove*, one of the latest, if not the last of his water colors is one of the most brilliant examples of this medium that I have ever seen. The glamorous color in thrilling and unexpected juxtapositions has a jewel-like quality. The artist actually seems to draw in color in this work so that line and color function with no division of interest, each brush stroke contributing definitely to the unity of the design.

In the water colors as in the paintings, although decorative pattern is the usual goal, it does not imply flat, two-dimensional work. There is remarkable perspective in many of the landscapes; figures are not in silhouette, but take their place quite definitely in spatial design. If you look closely, you realize how subtly distance is indicated between figures, between figures and trees or animals, the whole space pattern carefully organized to the least detail. This power of organization is marked in all of the paintings. In a few the emphasis is unexpectedly laid on solidity, indicating that the preference shown by the painter for pure decoration, objects subordinated to the texture of the pattern with no compulsion of naturalistic veracity, did not result from inability to paint naturalistic form in plastic design. *Figure Study*, in the Quinn Collection, the *Still Life* (1914), or *Pastoral*, one of the last canvases, all reveal how solidly he could build up mass and give interesting relations to these forms. *Pastoral* is one of the most impressive of Prendergast's paintings. The big, slow rhythms answer each other as definitely and melodiously as the strophe and antistrophe of a chant. Figures and decor are woven into a design of great nobility, each detail integrated in the organic whole. A garland of red flowers, carelessly flung down binds the plastic rhythms together. The deep blue of a foreground garment gains intensity from vivid yellow notes in the background. There are

greens, of course, silvery or actually golden in different degrees of light or through modifications of adjacent colors. Throughout the canvas there are beauty of formal relations and unusual refinements of subtly disposed color. It is the triumphant expression of an artist who never lost the rapture of the child's vision of the world, and who has given it back to us in terms of compelling beauty.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Maurice Brazil Prendergast was born in Boston in 1859. There was nothing in his ancestry to suggest that he would become interested in the Arts and, although he began to draw at an early age, his efforts were regarded only with amusement by those around him. He first came into contact with paint through washing brushes for a painter of show cards to whom he had been apprenticed; it was by painting these show cards that he supported himself at the age of fifteen. At seventeen he developed a penchant for painting cows and would devote his holidays to sketching them in the fields.

In 1884 on the advice of a minister's wife at Roxbury, the suburb of Boston where he lived, he and his brother Charles decided to go to Europe, working their way on a cattle boat. On arriving in Paris Maurice entered the life class at the Academie Julien, but Charles returned to America after only a brief stay. Maurice remained in Paris for more than three years, studying with Jean Paul Laurens and Blanc.

On his return to America in 1889 he and his brother settled in Winchester, Mass., several miles from Revere Beach where he frequently walked to make his earliest water colors of beach scenes.

His second trip to Europe took place during the years 1898–1899, but though he visited Paris, where he became interested in the work of Cézanne, Italy was his goal and Venice proved a peculiar delight. There he became acquainted with Venetian art and was especially attracted to the Carpaccio panels in the church of San Giorgio degli Schiavoni. The first of the Venetian water colors date from this period.

Returning to Boston he held a small exhibition at Chase's Gallery through the influence of Mrs. Montgomery Sears, who had also made possible his second European trip. By 1901 he had begun to make trips to New York, where he did water colors of Central Park; and it was during this year that he received the Bronze Medal for Water Color at

the Pan American Exposition, Buffalo. In 1905 his first important exhibition was held at Kimball's Gallery in conjunction with Charles Hopkinson and Charles Hovey Pepper. This exhibition proved, in so far as it concerned him, a financial failure. In the same year his first New York exhibition was held at the Macbeth Gallery. A Venetian water color, the only picture sold, was bought by another painter of Venice, William Gedney Bunce.

In 1910 he joined his brother Charles in Florence, but did little painting while abroad. During the summer of 1912 he went for the first time to New Hampshire where he did a group of water colors of mountains and villages. It was also in 1912 that the brothers, on receiving payment for a large order of picture frames they had made, decided to move from the suburb Winchester to Boston. They were not happy there, however, and after two years, when another large commission for frames brought them sufficient funds, moved finally to a studio overlooking Washington Square in New York. It was his work exhibited at the "Armory Show" of 1913 which laid the foundation of Maurice Prendergast's reputation, acquiring for him in New York a small but enthusiastic group of admirers; after this his work was seen with increasing frequency in exhibitions of national importance.

During the last European trip in 1914, just before the outbreak of the World War, little painting was done. Although permanently settled in New York, he continued to go each summer to Massachusetts where he painted, among other places, at Ipswich, Marblehead and Gloucester.

When, in 1922, his health began to fail Prendergast had to give up painting out of doors, and few water colors were made after this date. In December, 1923, the Third William A. Clark Prize of one thousand dollars and the Corcoran Bronze Medal were awarded to him for an oil painting on exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington. He continued, in spite of illness, to paint in his studio in New York almost to the time of his death, February 1, 1924. EDMUND ARCHER

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PORTRAIT OF A BOY.

H. 18½ inches W. 15 inches

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan
Astoria, L. I.

Still Life, 1924

H. 15¾ inches W. 20 inches

Collection of C. W. Kraushaar Gallery
New York

Frende

THE COVE, *about* 1920

H. 28 inches W. 39 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

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Water Color. 1918

H. 10⅝ inches W. 14⅝ inches

Collection of C. W. Kraushaar Gallery
New York

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PROMENADE, 1915

H. about 26 inches W. 38 inches

Collection of Barnes Foundation
Merion, Pa.

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Prendergast

Old-Fashioned Flowers, 1917

H. 19¼ inches W. 18 inches

Collection of Addison Gallery, Phillips Academy
Andover, Mass.

Autumn Festival, *about* 1917 *or* 1918

H. 24 inches W. 28 inches

Collection of Phillips Memorial Gallery
Washington, D. C.

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PONTE S. VIO (*Water Color*), 1910

H. 13¾ inches W. 19⅝ inches

Collection of C. W. Kraushaar Gallery
New York

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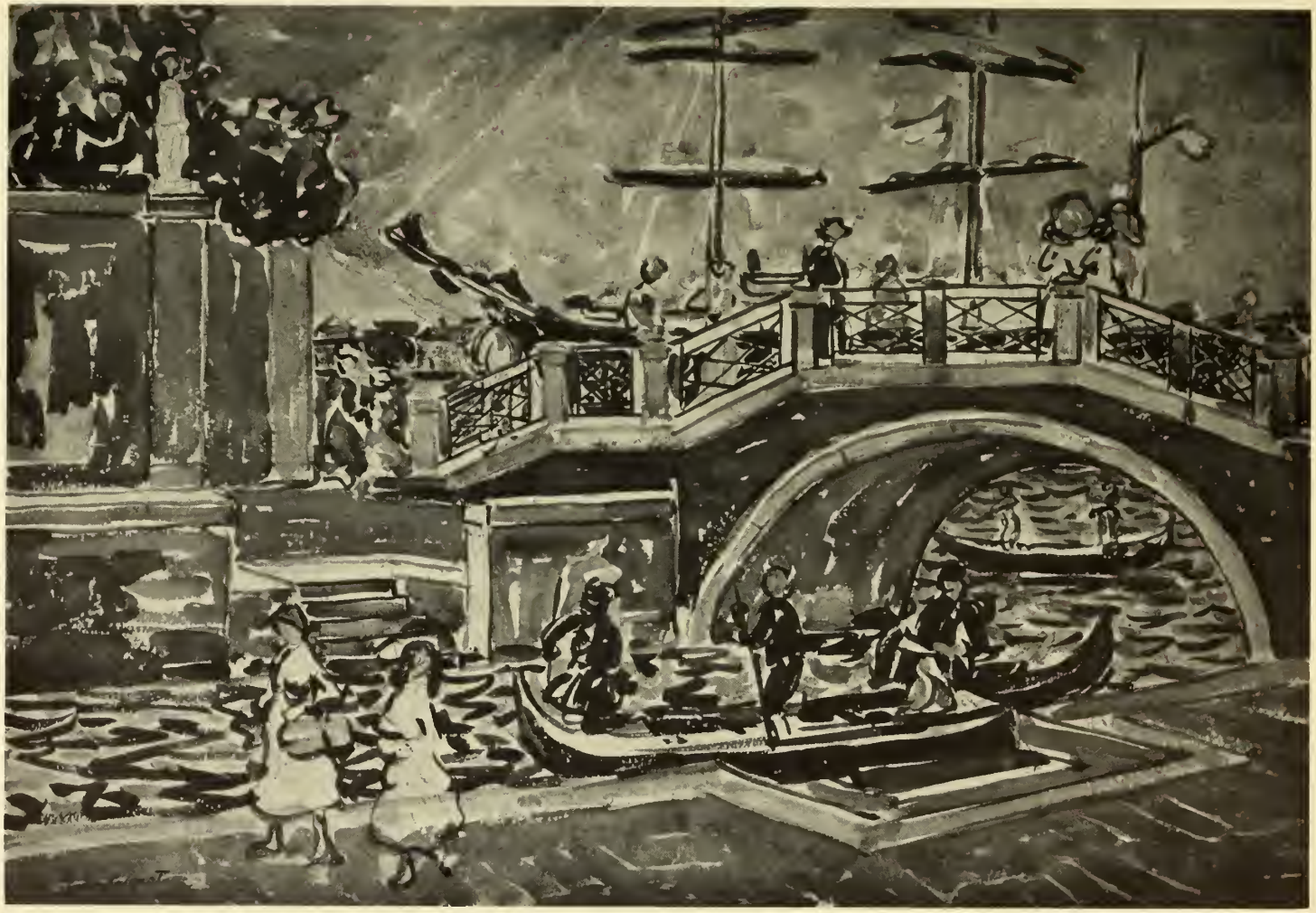

PROMENADE, GLOUCESTER, *about* 1918

H. 26 inches W. 34 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

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GLOUCESTER HARBOR. 1913

H. 18 inches W. 32 inches

Collection of Barnes Foundation
Merion, Pa.

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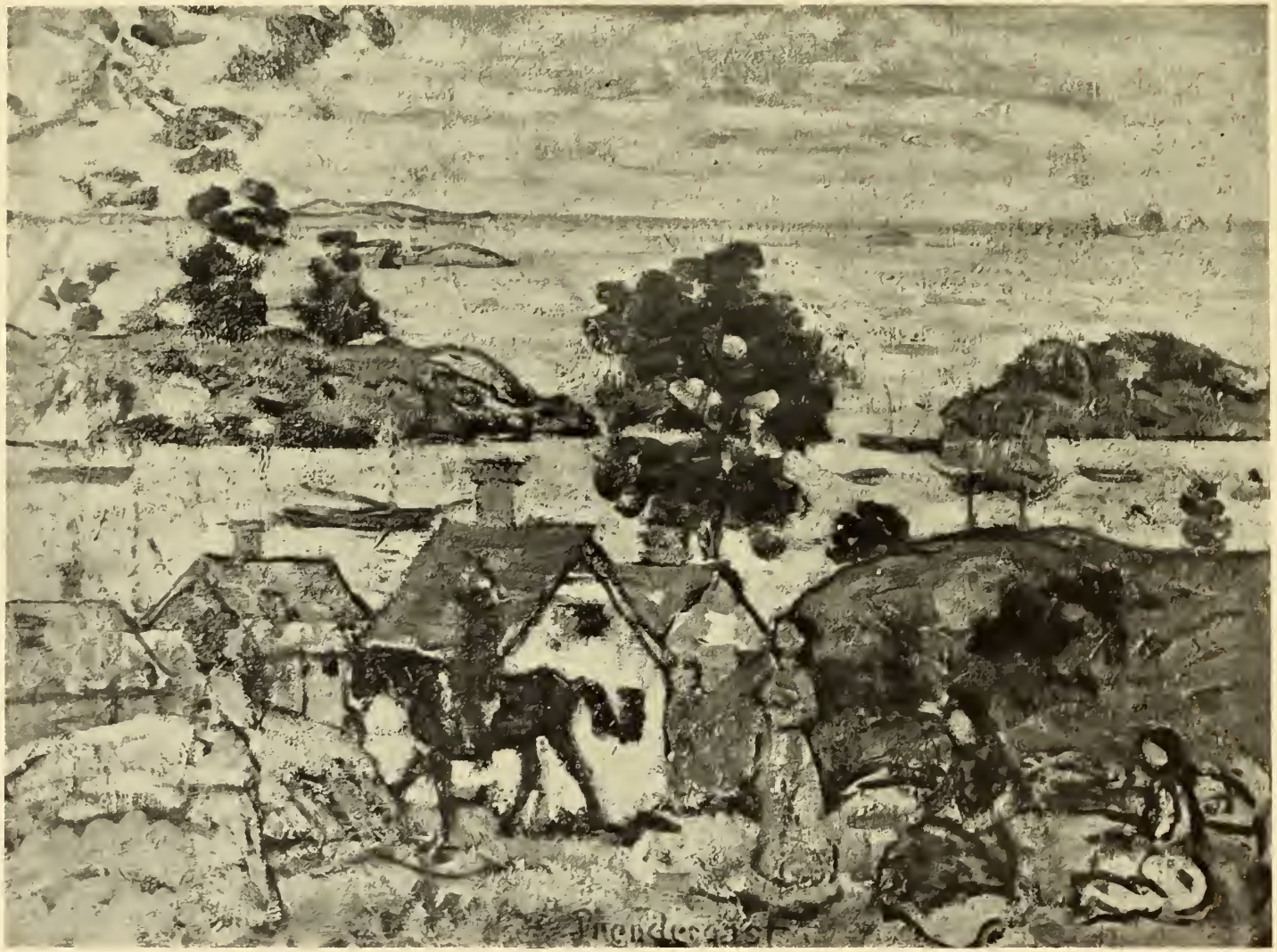

LITTLE BRIDGE, VENICE, 1910

(Water Color)

H. 14⅝ inches W. 18⅜ inches

Collection of C. W. Kraushaar Gallery
New York

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Sunset and Sea Fog, 1915

H. 18 inches W. 29 inches

Collection of Phillips Memorial Gallery
Washington, D. C.

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BATHING BEACH (*Water Color*)

H. 13⅝ inches W. 19⅜ inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

T. Prendergast

NOTRE DAME, PARIS (*Water Color*). 1910

H. 13½ inches W. 19½ inches

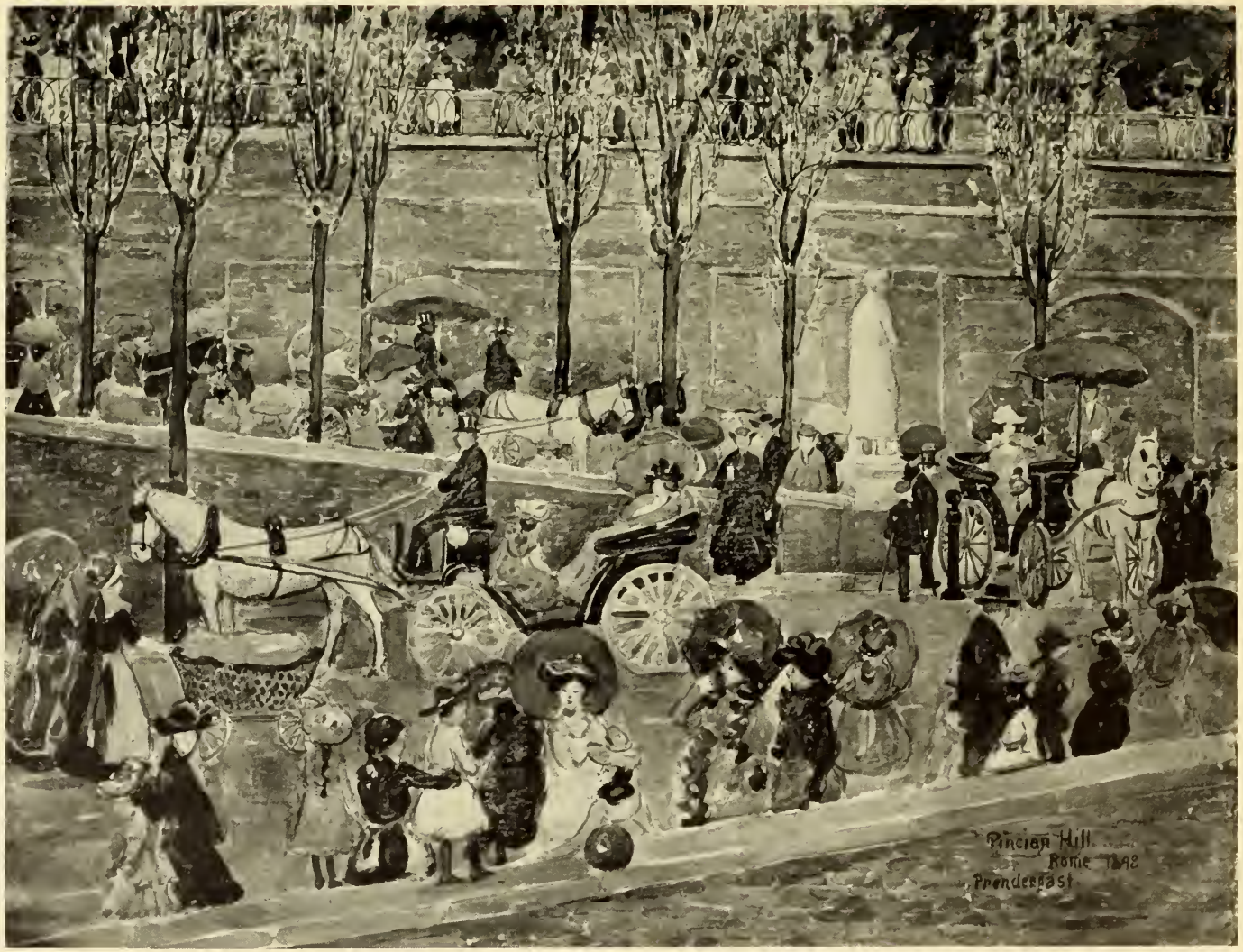
Collection of C. W. Kraushaar Gallery
New York

PINCIAN HILL, ROME, 1898

(Water Color)

H. 21 inches W. 27 inches

Collection of Phillips Memorial Gallery
Washington, D. C.


Pincian Hill.
Rome 1842
Prendergast

THE EAST RIVER (*Water Color*) 1901

H. 13½ inches W. 19½ inches

Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.
New York

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The Mall, Central Park, 1901

(Water Color)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Q. A. Shaw McKean
Boston

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April Snow, Salem, 1898

(Water Color)

H. 14¼ inches W. 21¼ inches

Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.
New York

Prendergast.

Ponte Della Paglia, 1899

H. 23 inches W. 28 inches

Collection of Phillips Memorial Gallery
Washington, D. C.

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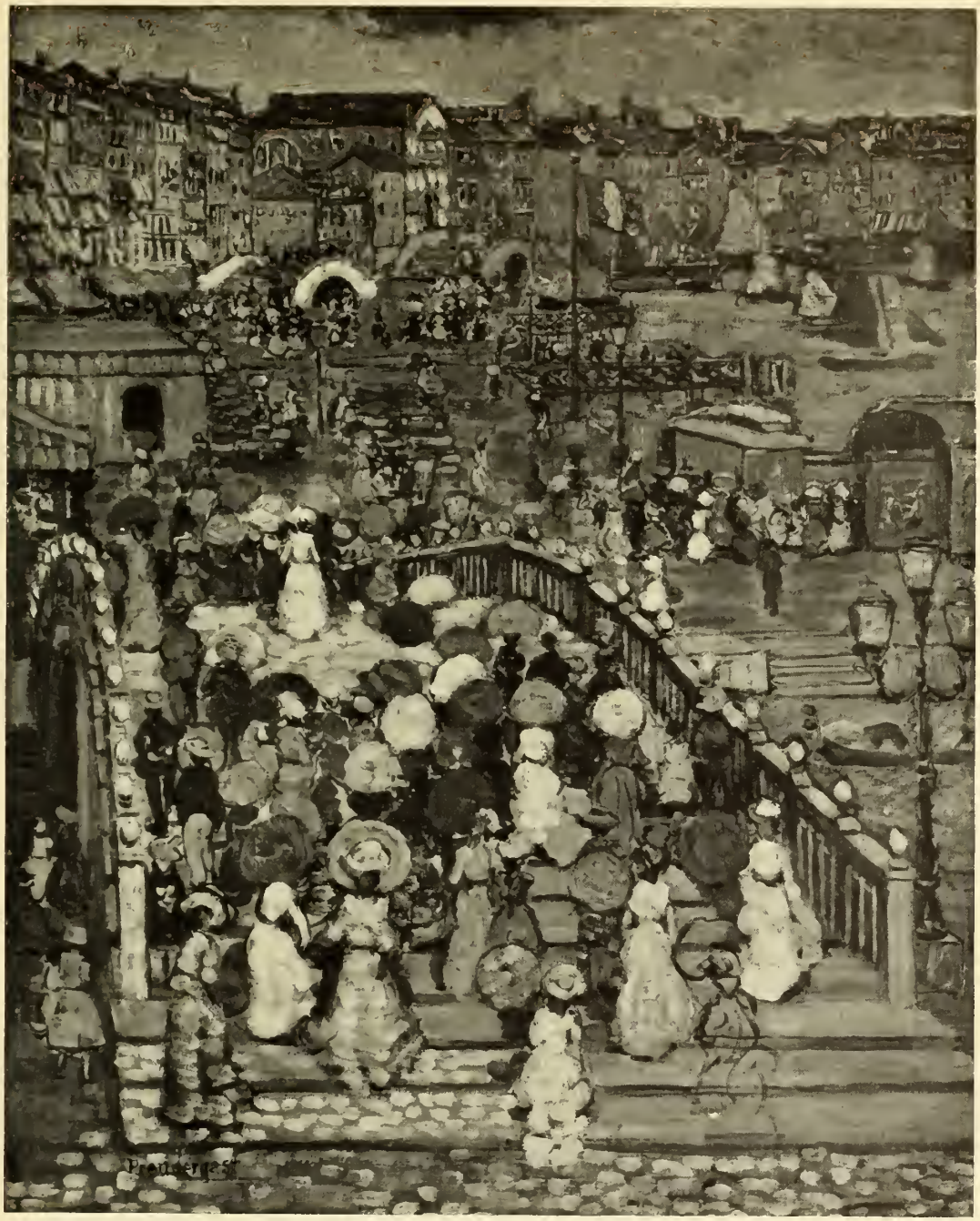

RAINY DAY, VENICE (*Water Color*), 1899

H. 16¼ inches W. 12 inches

Collection of Mr. John F. Kraushaar
New York

Maurice Prendergast

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